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DEPT FOR EUR/AGS, INR/EU, AND EUR/PPD FOR YVETTE SAINT-ANDRE

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WHITEHOUSE FOR NSC/WEUROPE

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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: January 31, 2008

Once Again, Coalition Tensions

11. The Austrian SPOe-OeVP coalition government's performance continues to be marked by massive tensions and quarrels between the two parties, Austrian media report. SPOe Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer accused his junior coalition partner, the OeVP, of "trying to make the Social Democrats look bad, while they are doing nothing but sitting back and taking a break." In response, OeVP party manager Hannes Missethon questioned whether the SPOe wanted to continue in government, given such statements, and warned that the Social Democrats should not use the OeVP to "vent their frustration."

All Austrian media report on the most recent tensions in the crisis-ridden coalition government. In an interview with mass-circulation weekly News of January 31, Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer harshly attacks the OeVP, accusing the People's Party of "only trying to make the SPOe look bad," and not doing anything constructive itself. "Apparently, the OeVP is still not over its election defeat for 2006. Not going beyond attacks on the Chancellor and the Social Affairs Minister make for a very poor program for any party in government. The OeVP will have to make up its mind whether it want to work against the SPOe, or finally begin working for Austria. Many in the People's Party have yet to do their part in this respect," Gusenbauer argued. According to the Chancellor, the OeVP "sees as its main task making the SPOe look bad. From what I've seen, they are not coming up with any major reform projects of their own. It is difficult enough the way it is, just trying to stick to implementing the coalition agreement. The picture that presents itself, I think, is that the OeVP is idly lounging in a hammock, and has confined itself to bickering."

Greens Politician Criticizes Austrian Chad Mission

12. Greens' security spokesperson Peter Pilz has criticized Austrian participation in the EU's EUFOR peacekeeping mission in Chad. Austria will contribute 160 troops, and an advance team departed for Chad Wednesday morning. Pilz called Austrian participation "well-meant but shabbily and negligently prepared for." He also charged that Austria would be supporting France's role in Chad's "civil war" and that Austrian involvement in the mission would violate the country's neutrality. Semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung reports on Greens' security spokesperson Peter Pilz's criticism of Austria's participation in the EU's peacekeeping mission in Chad. Pilz expressed his concern that the mission had been insufficiently prepared for, and argued that Austria would be supporting France's role in Chad's "civil war," which would be in violation of the country's neutrality.

Meanwhile, Communist Party spokesperson Mirko Messner called the EU mission "pure neo-colonialism" and an attempt to position the European Union economically in Africa. He added that the mission would undermine Austrian neutrality. The BZÖ asked in a press release why the mission had received so little support from the government, and compared SPO Defense Minister Norbert Darabos to a driver going the wrong way on an expressway and wondering why there were so many other drivers going in the "wrong" direction.

"Complete Rejection of Turkish EU Membership"

13. ... was a leading Austrian daily's front-page headline on January 30. The newspaper referred to a new survey carried out by European think tank "European Stability Initiative," which shows that a vast majority of Austrians is opposed to Turkey becoming a member of the European Union. 74 percent of interviewees hold that Turkey "simply isn't a European country," and believe the cultural differences between EU states and Turkey are just too big. The daily points out that Austrians, probably as a result of their opposition to Turkish EU membership, are hardly aware of the issue's positive aspects, as for example economic and security benefits. Centrist daily Die Presse, in a feature report on January 30 on Austria's profound opposition to Turkish EU membership, quoted from a recent Eurobarometer survey, according to which only 5 percent of Austrians are in favor of Turkey joining the European Union. The daily suggests that the political debate of the issue has had a massive impact on public opinion in Austria: This is a factor that an analysis of previous surveys demonstrates clearly. A similar survey carried out in 2002 still shows 32 percent of Austrians in favor of Turkish EU membership. At that time, interviewees did not make much of a distinction between how they viewed Bulgaria, Croatia or Turkey as EU states. The fact that Austrian politicians are meanwhile supporting a referendum on the question of Turkey becoming an EU member has caused concern among political analysts: The author of the most recent study has already warned of a "diplomatic disaster." Foreign affairs writer for centrist daily Die Presse Wolfgang Boehm commented on what he described as the "disgraceful Turkey debate," arguing that the "greatest danger is not that Austria will one day reject a Turkish EU membership in a projected referendum. The greatest danger is that, by showing a crude, undifferentiated and emotional attitude, it will shut off any options for Ankara. Already, Austria and France are decried in Turkey as those countries that intend to bar the country from gaining access to Europe. A responsible way of dealing with the problem would be to participate in developing a credible alternative to a full Turkish EU membership. Austria, he says, "can never be part of such a constructive debate if it does not also highlight the advantages of cooperation with Turkey. What is needed here is the courage to commit to Turkey - a country that is characterized by contradictions, but also has deep roots in the European culture."

McCain Likely Republican Frontrunner

14. Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani has given his support to Senator John McCain for the Republican nomination in this year's US presidential election. Giuliani announced his own withdrawal from the race after disappointing results in the Florida primary. Meanwhile, another prominent Republican, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, has said he will endorse McCain's candidacy. Meanwhile, among those seeking the Democrats' nomination, John Edwards has also left the race, without backing either of his main rivals, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. All Austrian media continue to report on the race for the White House and the outcome of the primary election in Florida. Liberal daily Der Standard reports on what it describes as "Rudy's pitiful end," and says that the former New York Mayor's "shameful defeat" in Florida has scuttled the former frontrunner's presidential aspirations. In view of the Florida results, everyone's eyes are now turned to John McCain, the daily says. The Standard's foreign affairs writer Christoph Prantner, reporting from the US on a PAS-assisted program, comments that aside from Giuliani's endorsement, "still more important for McCain is the fact that Mike Huckabee will presumably stay in the race until Super Tuesday - inspired by hopes of being nominated for the vice-presidency. This way, the Senator provides for the Republican vote being split

between two (social-) conservative candidates. This is an especially smart move in the 'Bible Belt' states. After all, Florida has shown that McCain ran a clear second to Romney with opponents of abortion or pro-Bush Republicans. Romney, on the other hand, can only pin his hopes on his financial resources. So far, he has poured 40 million dollar of his own money into the election campaign." In addition, Prantner argues, "the Republicans in those Super-Tuesday states, which have many delegates, such as New York or California, are generally more conservative than elsewhere. Also, in both states, only registered Republicans are allowed to vote in the primaries. Independents, who are strongly attracted to McCain, are excluded." Summing up the views of all major Austrian media, centrist daily Die Presse headlines "Edwards has given up, Giuliani has floundered," which leaves John McCain as the clear frontrunner in the competition for the Republican nomination. The daily's Washington correspondent Norbert Rief suggests that Giuliani's strategy to ignore the early primaries and caucuses in the small states and focus on Florida exclusively - a risky move that no candidate before him had dared to give a try - was his undoing in the end. Rief quotes political analyst Lance de Haven-Smith, who argues that Giuliani has "gambled away a tremendous opportunity. He could have won the Republican nomination, had he relied on a more conventional strategy."

Commission Slams Israel's War with Lebanon

15. An Israeli government-appointed inquiry has concluded that Israel's war against Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006 was a "serious failure." According to the report presented by the so-called Winograd Commission, Israel's military had no clear strategy, and consequently the country had been "dragged" into an inconclusive ground operation in Lebanon. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has insisted that he won't step down, despite the Commission's findings.

Like several Austrian media, liberal daily Der Standard reports on the conclusions by the Winograd Commission regarding Israel's war against Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006. The report has "spared" Israel's Premier Ehud Olmert, who is relieved about the Commission's assessment that the war against Lebanon was lost because of strategic shortfalls. The document does not contain any direct criticism of the Primer Minister. The Standard's Jerusalem correspondent Ben Segenreich comments that Olmert had come off lightly in the entire affair. The Commission's judgment of the military offensive's final three days, which had seen the launch of a hasty ground offensive that cost 33 Israeli soldiers their lives, as "virtually unavoidable" and in pursuit of legitimate goals" may have saved Olmert. Many observers had suggested that it was the decision in favor a ground offensive, which might cost the Premier dearly, Segenreich says, and points out that Olmert has already responded to the report by emphasizing that he will certainly not step down.

Fed Lowers Interest Rates

16. The US Federal Reserve has cut interest rates for the second time in nine days, as it tries to keep the US economy from entering a recession. The central bank lowered rates to 3 percent from 3.5 percent, but some analysts have criticized the move as short-sighted, and said it made the Federal Reserve look afraid of financial markets, according to ORF radio early morning news Morgenjournal.
Kilner